

Wiggle Room, a sermon in response to Jeremiah 17:5-10, Psalm 1, and Luke 6:17-26, by Rev. Scot McCachren at the First Presbyterian Church of East Hampton, February 17, 2019. (*Originally formatted to assist oral presentation, including irregular punctuation.*)

As I was growing up, and even through high school, I used to enjoy going to basketball games with my dad at Catawba College, where he was on the faculty. That's also where I ended up **going** to college – and I enjoyed three years on the cheerleading squad, now with a sideline view of the same court and team I had been coming to see for years. But when I was still in high school, I remember one particular game we went to – not because of the action of the game itself ((in fact, I have no recollection who the visiting team even *was*)) – no, the reason I remember that game is what was going on right behind us in the stands. +++ There was a father with his son – who was probably in the third grade or so. They seemed to have a good relationship and enjoyed being together, but the kid was constantly pushing his dad's limits – trying to see just how much he could get away with... “Dad – how far do you think I can throw this piece of popcorn?” ... “Don't throw that popcorn” ... “I'm not going to **hit** anybody, I'll just throw it on the steps.” ... “Don't you throw that popcorn.” ... “I'm not going to **throw** it, I'm just going to **toss** it.” ... “You better keep the popcorn in the box, or eat it.” ... “Oops!” ... “I told you not to throw the popcorn!” ... “I didn't throw it – I accidentally **dropped** it – *over there.*” +++ ... **“Give ME the popcorn!”** +++ Then a few seconds later, the dad said, “You know *you're missing the game* – you were so excited to see it, and it's a **really good game**, but all you're thinking about is how you can do stuff like throw popcorn without getting in trouble... +++ Of course, that wasn't the end of it. This kind of thing continued through the whole game. Finally, with about 10 minutes left, the boy saw his friend standing by the gym entrance – a set of doors right next to the basketball court. +++ “Can I go down and say hello to Greg?” ... “Why don't you wait to see where he sits, *then* go say hello?” ... “No – he might be **leaving**. I want to say hello before he leaves.” ... “If I let you go, will you go straight down there – say hello – and then come straight back?” ... “Yes, I will.” ... “OK, but you really need to do what I say this time.” +++ And, then, just as the boy was about to go – the dad said:: “And don't you **dare** set foot on the basketball court.” +++ +++ At that point... **I distinctly remember thinking**: “This is **not** going to end well.” +++ I watched as the boy made his way through the stands and down on to the floor with his friend, Greg. I was **not** surprised when he didn't simply say hello and come straight back. He stood there with his friend until there was a timeout in the game, then, as the players huddled on the sidelines, the boy walked to the very edge of the court – looked up into the stands at his dad and smiled – as he slowly picked up his foot and set it back down, very deliberately, **just inbounds** – literally “**setting foot** on the basketball court.” +++ Then he happily returned to his dad in the seats behind me. +++ +++ ([[Now... this might be a good time to pause and acknowledge that *we ourselves* might not have handled this turn of events the same way **that** father did. I **know** I wouldn't have – but I'm just telling you what did, in fact, happen.]])) +++ +++

I could tell his father was angry, but he tried not to show it. He said something like this:: “Why do you push me like that? You're always looking for **WIGGLE ROOM** – thinking about how you can do the wrong thing and get away with it. You'd enjoy the **good parts of life** a lot more if you'd just do what's *right* in the **first place**. We came here to enjoy the game – so **enjoy the game!** You want to grow up to know right from wrong – to be the best person you can be. The way to do that is to be the best person you can be **right now**... and **all** the time!” +++ +++ Now, I don't know if that kid ever changed... – my guess is that he did **eventually**, after he grew up a little – and after he heard that speech a dozen more times. +++ **He was just lucky to have such a patient and loving Father**,... a father who kept **forgiving** him – kept pointing him back in right direction – over and over again. +++ +++ I kept thinking about that kid that night, after the game – about what his dad said to him. +++ And also thinking about how it applied to me, too. As a high school student, I was making decisions about a **lot more** than throwing popcorn or stepping on a basketball court. +++ Was **I** enjoying the good parts of life – becoming the best person **I** could be? Or was I looking for **Wiggle Room** – using my energy to just get by without getting into *real* trouble – enough to have my cake and eat it, too?

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These are the questions our scripture readings encourage each of us to ask ourselves this morning: none more directly than Psalm #1:: “¹**Happy** are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; ²but **their delight** is in the law of the **LORD**, and on his law they meditate

day and night. ³They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.” +++ The way we live our lives – each moment – defines the quality of our lives. And, pursuing the ways of God – making it a central part of *every decision*... (?)... – **THAT’S** the way to *be all* we are meant to be:: ... it’s how we can spread our roots through healthy soil by the water’s edge – and grow strong in the Lord. +++ +++ It’s the same image that comes to us from Jeremiah:: “*Blessed* are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. ⁸They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

To be clear – both readings give us the unfortunate alternative as well. Jeremiah warns, “Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord... They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.” +++ And the Psalmist writes, “the wicked... are like chaff that the wind drives away... The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” +++ +++ We are faced with a simple yet very difficult question:: **Who are you going to be?** :: a tree planted by the water, or a parched shrub that will blow away in the wind? It seems to be one or the other... I don’t see a “Middle Way” here +++ no Wiggle Room::: either you are pursuing the ways of the Lord – or you aren’t. +++ And, like the boy at the basketball game... +++ WE are just lucky to have such a patient and loving Father in Heaven... a Father who keeps forgiving *us* – keeps pointing *us* back in the right direction – over and over again. +++ +++

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Our Gospel reading is from Luke’s “Sermon on the Plain” – a different account of Matthew’s more-famous “Sermon on the Mount.” And, it’s helpful to notice just what is happening in this part of Luke. Jesus has just chosen his 12 Apostles. They are named, literally, in the 3 verses immediately before our reading. +++ So, one important thing that’s going on is that Jesus is teaching his Apostles what it means to follow him. **What does it really mean to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?** +++ When they come to the level place, there’s a great multitude of people already gathered – they want to be healed. +++ And before Jesus even says one word to the crowd – right in full view of the Apostles and everyone else – he drives out unclean spirits and heals everyone in the crowd... Only then, after he heals them all, does Jesus begin speaking... **Blessed** are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, who are hated. – In short – blessings come to those who suffer... And **woe** comes to the rich, those with plenty to eat, and those who are respected. +++ Jesus turns the values of this world upside down. +++ I like the way Debbie Thomas struggles with the Sermon on the Plain in her essay called “Blessings and Woes.” She writes that we’re tempted to edit Jesus words to make us “feel better. As in, he didn’t really mean *poor*, did he? Homeless poor? Dressed-in-rags poor? Slum poor?... Or hungry as in, *literally* hungry? Starving for bread? Also, he couldn’t possibly have meant *sad* people as in, people drowning in grief and despair... *Wouldn’t* it be cruel to call them ‘blessed?’ ... Obviously, Jesus was exaggerating. Speaking figuratively. Kidding. Right? I mean, come on! There must be **some [other] way** I can [get] out of the ‘woes’ column and into the ‘blessed’ column, right? **Right?**” Some kind of **Wiggle Room** for folks like me?? **Right??**... +++ **“Wrong... ++ unlike Matthew**, who softens things a bit by writing ‘poor in spirit,’ instead of ‘poor,’ and ‘those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,’ instead of plain old ‘hungry,’ Luke keeps Jesus’ sermon... raw, terse, and close to the bone... God’s favor... rests on those who have absolutely nothing to fall back on but God... If you want to know where God’s heart is, Luke insists, look to the world’s most reviled, wretched, starving, grieving, shamed and desperate people.” +++ And it is to **those** people that Jesus will lead his new Apostles – and call us – to serve. – **Those** are the ones Christ will feed,... will heal,... will comfort. +++ +++ Thomas writes that we “have something to learn about discipleship that our life circumstances will not teach us. Something to grasp about the beauty, glory, and freedom of the Christian life that we’ll never grasp until God becomes our *everything*,... *our all*..., *our go-to*,... *our starting place*,... *and our ending place*.” Until the Lord is our **Plan A** – and we have **no Plan B** to fall back on. +++ Discipleship isn’t about what you *have* – it’s about who you *are* – whom you choose to be.

So – this morning, I’m still thinking about the boy and his dad in the stands, decades ago – and I’m wondering – are we sometimes **missing a really good game** – the game our Father brought us here to see, because we’re so wrapped up in **OUR** ...stuff, ...our comfort, ...our respect? Are **we** so focused on finding Wiggle Room – enjoying

God's grace, forgiveness, and blessings without truly changing our priorities – that we fail to place Christ at the center of our lives? +++ +++ "**Blessed** are the poor, the hungry, those who weep, who are hated, for yours is the kingdom of God." +++ **Christ is the Lord of those who gather around him, desperately needing to be touched by him** – to be healed, ...fed, and ...comforted **first** – before he even begins to speak. +++ +++ ***Go*** to him – +++***need*** him – +++***follow*** him – be the best person you can be – and live a blessed life "like trees planted by streams of water... [whose] leaves... [will never] wither.

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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen